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SUBJECT: SOMALIA - DIALOGUE AND DINNER WITH PRESIDENT SHARIF

REF: NAIROBI 479

Classified By: Ambassador Ranneberger for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: On March 17, the Ambassador hosted President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed and five TFG ministers for dinner at his residence. Sharif was in Nairobi at the conclusion of his mission to Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda. The trip marked Sharif's first bilateral visits since becoming TFG President. In the AMISOM troop contributing countries, Sharif thanked the Presidents of Burundi and Uganda for their commitment and asked for additional troop contributions. He told us that AMISOM is critical the success of his government. Sharif highlighted reconciliation and peace-building and establishing security and the rule of law as the top two priorities of his government's "90-day plan." He characterized the TFG's endorsement of Sharia as "a tool to further the peace process" and to bring in those who feel this issue is of central importance, as well as to neutralize his government's religious critics. Sharif told us he plans to use Sharia to advance the constitutional process leading to elections, which is his government's ultimate goal. Sharif and his team outlined the financial management and oversight mechanisms they were implementing in order to generate, track, and disburse revenues in order to attract the immediate funding it desperately needs to support its security forces and begin delivering basic services to the population. Sharif used the friendly dinner to articulate clear priorities for his administration and re-affirm his commitment to continuing the peace process, while changing the image of government in the eyes of average Somalis. He stressed his desire to work closely with us. End summary.

Sharif Concludes First Regional Mission

12. (C) On March 17, the Ambassador hosted President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed and five ministers from the new unity Transitional Federal Government (TFG) for dinner at his residence. Sharif was in Nairobi at the conclusion of his mission to Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda. The trip marked Sharif's first bilateral travel since being elected TFG President on January 31. He was well received by the heads of state in each of the countries he visited.

13. (C) The members of the cabinet who accompanied President Sharif both on his regional mission and at the dinner were Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Sharif Hassan Sheikh Aden, Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohamed Abdullahi Omaar, Minister of Defense Mohamed Abdi Mohamed "Ghandi," Minister of Water and Mineral Resources Abdallah "Boss"

Ahmed, Minister of Posts and Telecommunications Abdirizak Osman Hassan "Jurile." Also in attendance was Somali Ambassador to Kenya Mohamed Ali Nur "Americo." The delegation was scheduled to depart Nairobi for Khartoum on March 20. While in Nairobi, Sharif and his delegation meet with other members of the international community and held extensive meetings with a range of Somali decision-makers.

Mutual Intent to Expand Engagement

¶4. (C) The Ambassador welcomed Sharif with a clear expression of our policy to support and help his government succeed stating, "This is Somalia's best chance to enhance national stability and we plan to work collaboratively with you to counter extremists and rebuild the country."

¶5. (C) Sharif opened by expressing his deep appreciation for the U.S. commitment to the Djibouti process culminating in the establishment of this unity government. He said he has been pleasantly surprised that thus far, the U.S. has not fallen into its tendency to "build and then leave." Sharif indicated his wish to continue and expand the positive relationship his team has with the Embassy. He stressed that public involvement in the process and people-to-people engagement between Somalia and the U.S. were key components of his strategy. He said the desire for peace throughout Somalia is palpable, and is driving the peace process.

Clear Support for AMISOM

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¶6. (C) Sharif said it was important that his first trip as President outside Somalia be to the AMISOM troop contributing countries. Sharif told us his priority was to visit wounded AMISOM troops in Nairobi and personally thank the presidents of Burundi and Uganda for their commitment. Sharif told us he had asked these two countries to keep their troops in Somalia, and had urged additional troop contributions. Sharif stated categorically that AMISOM is key to the immediate success of his government.

¶7. (C) Sharif expressed deep gratitude to AMISOM stating, "The presence of AMISOM is critical as they are essential for securing the peace -- their mission is not yet complete." Sharif said that in Burundi, he asked for the immediate deployment of an additional battalion. The TFG President acknowledged the U.S. position to support and engage AMISOM and told us that over the next six months, as the government trains and equips its forces, this priority makes sense. Sharif indicated that our promised \$5 million contribution would enable the Joint Security Forces to collaborate more effectively with AMISOM.

Top Priority) Security

¶8. (C) Sharif outlined the immediate priorities for his government: reconciliation and peace-building, and establishing security and the rule of law. He emphasized the need for visible signals of state authority on the ground. These priorities, Sharif said, are guiding the "90-day Action Plan" for his government. This plan was launched, debated, and approved by the Council of Ministers. Sharif said that upon their arrival, the entire Mogadishu populace came out to greet them and at present, they enjoy wide support in the capital. He recognized that to increase this support, he must immediately demonstrate, in visible ways, that the government has returned. Sharif said that the rank and file of al-Shabaab want to stop fighting, but their leadership is unwilling to compromise.

¶9. (C) Sharif expressed some frustration that the USG financial commitment to AMISOM had not been matched by a

similar commitment to the TFG's Joint Security Forces. President Sharif asked the Ambassador bluntly, "What is the plan for Somalia's security forces?" He explained that the government managed to feed and pay its forces minimal salaries of \$60 each this month by borrowing money from Somali businessmen. The Ambassador emphasized the U.S. commitment to support the joint security forces, initially with \$5 million. The Ambassador encouraged Sharif to reach out to Gulf countries for immediate financial resources, in particular during the upcoming Arab League Summit. Sharif said he recognized that sufficient resources may not be immediately available from outside, and has launched several initiatives aimed at internal revenue generation (detailed below). While security is the top priority, Sharif equally emphasized the value of focusing on the public image of his government.

Sharia Law:
A Tool to Further Peace

¶10. (C) Sharif said he would work with the business community, elders, religious and clan leaders to use their influence to shape public perception of the government. He said it was these leaders who put forth Sharia as "a tool to further the peace process." Without being asked, Sharif launched into an explanation of his views on Sharia and offered insight on the reasons he had decided to implement Sharia law. Sharif acknowledged that Somalis do not share common views on Sharia and those who advance it for political purposes are attempting to trap and gain an upper hand on his government.

¶11. (C) The TFG's acceptance of Sharia had stripped one more pretext spoilers were using to manipulate public sentiment. Sharif argued that Somalis "live by Sharia every day." Sharia had "provided rules when the state did not exist." Sharif said that he hopes this decision does not cause fear in the U.S., and noted that U.S. commitment to religious freedom should encompass Sharia, as well. Somalia's original

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constitutions and the Transitional Federal Charter all state that laws and policies must be in conformance with Sharia. The TFG's embrace of Sharia, Sharif concluded, merely acknowledges what already is a fact in Somalia. Sharif stressed his strong opposition to extremist views of Sharia.

¶12. (C) Sharif told the Ambassador that the new constitution would be presented and approved by parliament, then confirmed by referendum as a key aspect of the transitional process. Sharif emphasized that the basic objective of his transitional government is to help Somalia get to a place where people can choose their leader, "one man, one vote." To do this, the TFG had to be functional, credible, and viable, and he enlisted the USG's support in that effort. We indicated that a clear financial mechanism to ensure oversight and transparency would help us channel direct resources to support his government and encourage others to do the same.

Improving Financial Oversight

¶13. (SBU) Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Sharif Hassan outlined the concrete steps Sharif's government has taken to improve fiscal transparency. Financial management was the first issue that the Council of Ministers had debated. It had decided to appoint a cabinet sub-committee to develop proposals for financial oversight mechanisms. At the same time, in an effort to generate immediate revenues, they had focused on the port and airport. All cash transactions at the port and airport had already been supplanted by a system of bank transfers, Hassan said. Goods could only be received with a receipt from one of these institutions. Oversight would be further improved by the

"financial police," a specialized unit with its own force, which will be assigned to oversee the port and airport.

¶14. (SBU) The Council had decided that for thirty days, no funds could be withdrawn from the separate port and airport accounts so that at the end of the period, the government could accurately gauge average revenues. At the end of this period, all public funds (for both the executive and legislative branches) would be accessed only once ministerial budgets had been approved. Sharif projected that each ministry would present proposals to the cabinet by the week of March 23. All proposals would have to be approved by the Parliament. He said that this process is being assisted by a retired IMF country director of Somali origin who is offering advice and expertise.

Countering al-Shabaab

¶15. (C) In response to a question from the Ambassador, Sharif acknowledged that al-Shabaab's lack of a formal structure made it difficult to determine its size and reach. He implied that the group was losing momentum because "it has no clear political agenda and the public did not understand its objectives," since the January withdrawal of the ENDF. At the same time, there is internal competition and friction that has made those within al-Shabaab, particularly in the lower ranks, eager to pursue other options. Sharif acknowledged that senior members of al-Shabaab were not ready for dialogue, and guessed that there would be people with whom it would be impossible to bridge the gap.

¶16. (SBU) We agreed that in addition to strengthening the government's security posture, there is a vital role for public diplomacy in Sharif's struggle with al-Shabaab and other anti-government groups. Sharif asked for help with the TFG's public diplomacy strategy, which would be critical in isolating spoilers and making Somalis aware of the TFG's efforts. Sharif specifically noted that cooperation should include a positive message on the U.S. role in Somalia, and on U.S.-TFG relations. He also mentioned the possibility of support for the re-establishment of state-owned Radio Somalia. The Ambassador agreed to explore such cooperation.

Engaging with Neighbors

¶17. (SBU) In Rwanda, we understand Sharif was visibly moved during his tour of the genocide memorial. During his dinner

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with the Ambassador, Sharif suggested that Rwanda could be a case study for Somalia for recovery from a violent conflict. In Kenya, Sharif said that he and President Kibaki had held productive talks about ways to rebuild their bilateral relationship. As he told the Ambassador during a March 10 telephone conversation (reftel), Sharif thought that there were many opportunities exist for capacity-building exchanges, training of security and police forces, and mutual cooperation to secure the border. During their March 17 - 20 visit to Nairobi, Sharif and his team again met with GOK representatives.
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